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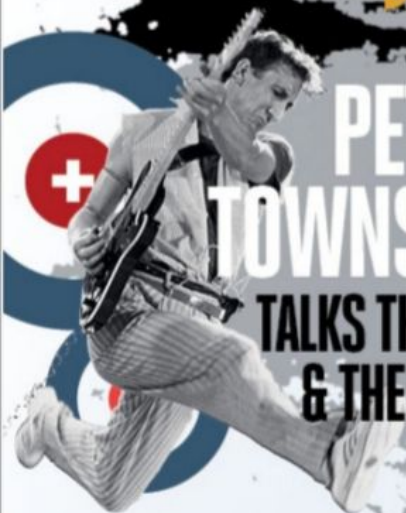
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“IF I KNEW I WAS GONNA INFLUENCE THOUSANDS OF GUITAR PLAYERS, I WOULD’A PRACTICED MORE!”
EX-KISS LEGEND **ACE FREHLEY** TAKES A STRUT
DOWN MEMORY LANE

BY ANDREW DALY

FIRST KISS

With no musical training and a restless personality, there are a lot of assumptions thrown around when it comes to “Space” Ace Frehley. Some are true, but most, if not all, are unfounded. His detractors would declare Frehley unreliable and rudimentary. But if we look back, he never missed a single Kiss show. And as far as his playing goes, Frehley is consid-

ered a pillar of rock and metal, especially within the guitar community. How’s that for rudimentary?

Through his patented use of “dinosaur bends” and a torrential fury of frenetic notes, a.k.a. total fretboard domination, Frehley created an individualistic sound that’s impossible to duplicate. But that’s not all; he’s authentic as they come as a personality, making him a

lovable character that shredders and slow-burners alike aspire to.

But back in the Seventies, when Frehley was a young gun with a beer in one hand and a Les Paul in another, he couldn’t have imagined it. “I’m always flattered when people tell me I influenced them,” he says. “If I knew I was gonna influence thousands of guitar players, I woulda practiced more.

PHOTO: ROBIN PLATZER/IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES



Ace Frehley on stage
with Kiss at NYC's
Madison Square Garden,
July 25, 1979

[Laughs] I laugh, but that's the truth. I didn't know I would become this iconic guitar player that so many people would listen to. I've had so many players come up to me and say, 'You are the reason I play guitar,' and I'm always like, 'Wow...'

Stunning as it is to the 72-year-old Bronx native, it rings true. On the strength of classics like "Strutter," "Deuce," "Strange Ways" and "Shock Me," Frehley unknowingly developed integral style elements that would define the across-the-board progression of rock guitar. But to do that, first, he had to couple up alongside Paul Stanley. When asked what the secret sauce was, he says, "More than anything, it was chemistry. But it's hard to say; it's always that way with those things. I do know that the little things about my style fit alongside Paul's well."

"Paul is a great rhythm player, and I am, too," Frehley says. "When we did chord work together, I'd play an octave up, so I wasn't doubling him. That came naturally, like during 'Strutter,' it's there. Paul is playing the low parts, and I'm doing the octaves. I liked to thicken up the song, which Paul agreed with. It just made sense."

Frehley left Kiss for the second and final time in 2002, but his imprint is scrawled in indelible ink across the band. Some deny it, others ignore it, but the fact remains. Still, Frehley can't be bothered with any of that these days. And with five solo records in the bank since leaving Kiss, and another, *10,000 Volts*, which Frehley calls "the best thing he's done since the '78 solo record," due in February, it's easy to see why.

Looking back on it all, true to form, Frehley doesn't get too deep: "It's a nice sentiment, but I don't look at myself as some brilliant guitar player," he says. "I've never taken a lesson, and my sense of melody came from singing in the church choir. So, whatever I have, it can't be taught. You've gotta have it in you. Either you've got it, or you've got nothing at all."

Did you have a guitar-related vision when you joined Kiss?

My guitar sound hasn't changed after all these years, so the template has stayed the same. If you follow what I do now, you'll get it. But I was always old school, played through a Marshall turned up to 10, and played a Les Paul for the most part. That's my sound, you know? The exception would be when I played one of my smoking guitars; I'd have repetitive delay when I did that.

I assume effect pedals didn't factor in much, as I've never seen them at your feet.

I use them a little, but I'm mostly a guitar-into-an-amp type of player. But when I have used effects, like fuzz, wah and drive, my roadies would run that stuff because I can't have pedals on the floor; I'd trip over them. [Laughs] You'd be hard pressed to find a photo of me playing with pedals on the floor; I'd be shocked if you could find one. It's rock 'n' roll, so I don't need 'em much anyway.

Paul Stanley has often spoken about creating "one big guitar" sound in Kiss's early years. Was that your viewpoint, too?

If you read what many people have written over the years — especially about the early days — most say I was the

sound of Kiss. And the thing with that is I never really worked hard on it. I just took a Les Paul, plugged it into a Marshall, and away I went. I get what Paul means when he says that, but there's more to it regarding how I get harmonics. But to me, it was pretty much a no-brainer to do that.

One thing that's not often mentioned is your use of octaves in Kiss's early music.

Oh, yeah, Paul would play barre chords and introduce the song, and I'd try to play the octave of his part. That would make the whole song thicker, rather than me doubling Paul's parts. Paul and I were cognizant of that, did the octave thing, and it worked well. It's cool that you picked that out; it doesn't get called out too often when people ask me about early Kiss music.

Regarding solos, did you have an approach?

All my solos, well, 90 percent of my solos were off the cuff. As long as I've been doing this, I empty my head, ask someone to tell me what key it's in and go for it. It might take me three, four, five or even six passes, but that's the way I do my best work. If I'm relaxed, and nothin' is botherin' me, and I can empty my head, the solos usually come out great. That's how it was in the Seventies, and it's the same today. If I'm not worried about stuff happening around me, I'm usually fine when doing a solo.

Your solos are thematic to the point that they're songs within the song.

That's a good point. If you listen to how my solos come out, meaning if you listen to how I play closely, you'll hear that I'm a blues-based player. And for me, that goes back to being a huge fan of guys like [Eric] Clapton and [Jimmy] Page; those guys played solos that you'd be humming for days while you're walking around, you know?

So there's an element of intent to what you're doing, then.

Those guys I mentioned had solos you could hum, but they also had these moments where I'd go, "Wait... what was that?" I learned that if I could make thousands of

people turn their heads when I played a solo by being able to hum it but also by having speed and agility, that I was doing something right. But that doesn't mean it's always about playing fast, either. I was good friends with Eddie Van Halen but knew I could never play like that. So having a lot of melodic sense was important, too. I'd play fast in the *right* spots, let it rip in others and slow down when needed.

You mentioned using a Les Paul, but it's said that you used an Ovation Breadwinner on the first Kiss record. Why was that?

I don't know what people are talking about when they say that. I've seen that for so long, and I don't know who first said I used the white Ovation guitar on the first Kiss record [Kiss]. I played that guitar during Kiss's early shows, and it was the guitar I used when Bill Aucoin came to see Kiss before he signed us, but I didn't use it on the first Kiss record.

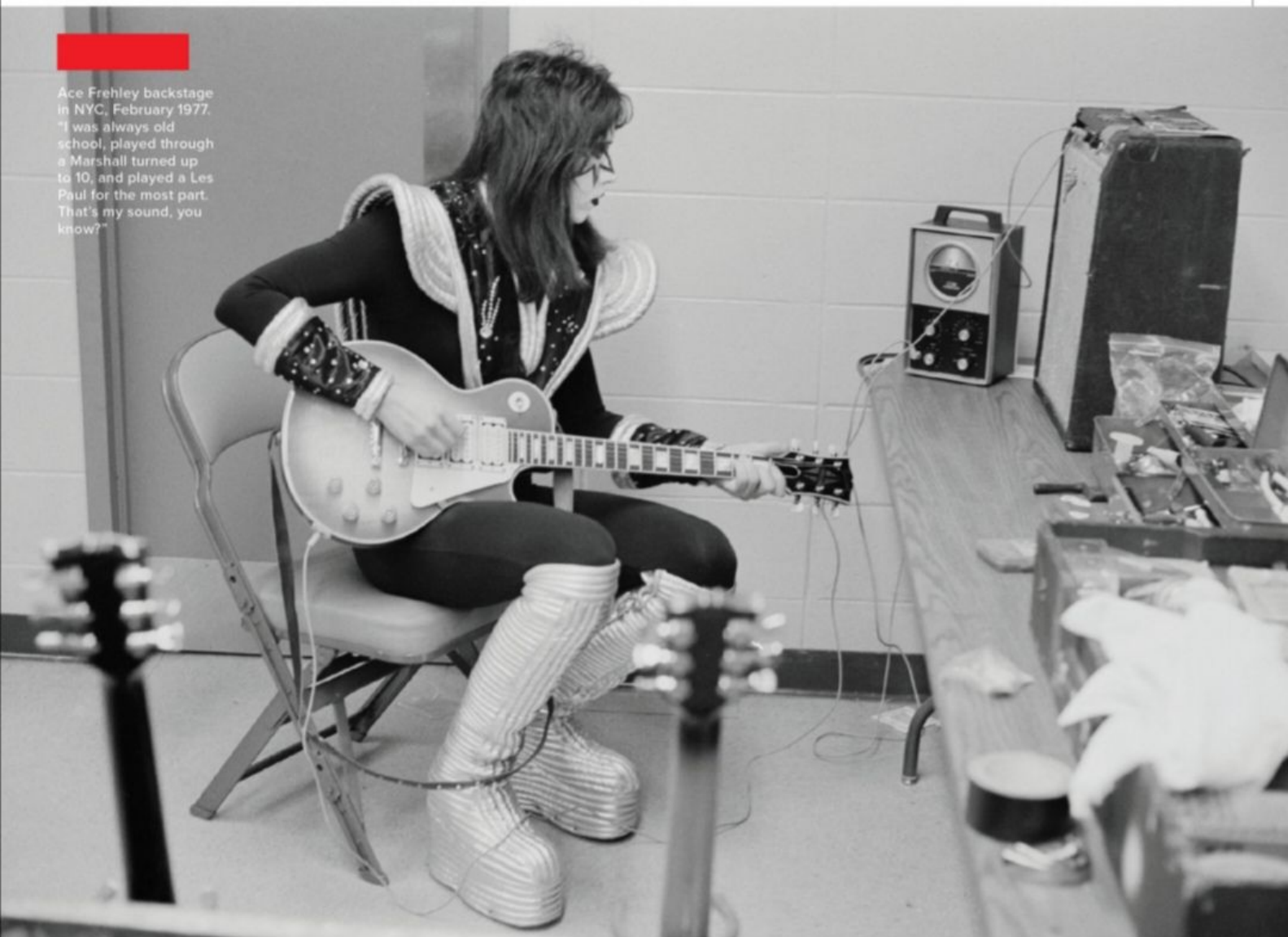
You've just debunked a long-standing narrative about the recording of Kiss's first record. What guitar did you use, then?

I had been playing the Ovation, put humbuckers in it, and grew to like that sound. I thought it was cool, which is probably part of what drew me to Les Paul guitars, with the other being that a Les Paul has a 6 percent neck angle in reference to the body. You can't lay a Les Paul flat on the table because of that arch, and when you tighten the strings, there's tension and body resonance — especially if it's made of good wood. That aside, I probably played my red Epiphone double-cutaway, the same one Steve Marriott played [Coronet].

I've seen that you didn't come upon the tobacco sunburst Les Paul until after Kiss was recorded. But you're saying you bought it before and that you used it during the recording, then?

I'm sure I used my tobacco Les Paul on the first Kiss record, along with the red Epiphone, and maybe even a Strat. I liked the Ovation because it had a neat shape and how it sounded with the humbuckers. But I wanted something cooler like the guitars Clapton and Page played. So, the minute Kiss signed the contract with Casablanca [Records], I went to Manny's Music in New York City and bought the tobacco sunburst Les Paul. And

Ace Frehley backstage in NYC, February 1977. "I was always old school, played through a Marshall turned up to 10, and played a Les Paul for the most part. That's my sound, you know?"



then, later, I converted that to my first smoking guitar before I turned it into a double cut.

What's the definitive guitar moment from Kiss's early Seventies era?

It's hard to say; honestly, I rarely think about things in those terms. Most people would say my solo from *Alive!* was great. But it's a tricky question; I've recorded hundreds of solos, but from the first three albums, I'd have to go with "Deuce." That was the first song I played with Kiss during my audition. I came in with a Gibson reverse Firebird with banjo tuning pegs and a 50-watt Marshall. I remember ripping through "Deuce" with them and thinking it was great, but they told me, "We'll get back to you in two weeks." But Paul later told me, "We knew you were the guy; we just didn't want to tell you right away." [Laughs]



"PAUL LATER
TOLD ME, '**WE
KNEW YOU
WERE THE
GUY**'; WE JUST
DIDN'T WANT
TO TELL YOU
RIGHT AWAY'"

Were you comfortable making a regimented record like *Destroyer* as an off-the-cuff player?

People don't always say as much, but me and [producer] Bob Ezrin got along most of the time. But sometimes, I showed up late because I had a hang-over from the night before. Everybody knows I was an alcoholic, and luckily, I just celebrated 17 years of sobriety, but back then, it was different. Bob was a guy who liked to get things done quickly, probably because he had a mountain of cocaine and a bottle of Remy Martin on the mixing desk with him. But, of course, Paul and Gene [Simmons] never mention that.

I take it you weren't informed that Dick Wagner would be subbing for you on "Sweet Pain."

No, I wasn't. Later, I was told Bob did that because he felt my solos weren't as great as they should have been, so he had Dick play them. But it was more about punishing me for not being on time. I see it as partially my fault but also partly Bob's fault. But the thing that bothered me most was that I wasn't told he had replaced my solos; I had to find out after I listened to the record at home on my turntable. That bothered me for a long time.

[from left] Gene Simmons,
Ace Frehley and
Paul Stanley in action
in the Seventies



Bob did have a hand in releasing the *Destroyer Resurrected* version of "Sweet Pain" with your solo in 2012. I found your solo to be better than Dick's.

I'd have to listen to it, hang on [Ace pauses to listen to his version of "Sweet Pain"]. You like my solo better than Dick's, huh? Well, Dick was a great player, and he did a great solo, but I don't think there's anything wrong with mine. [Laughs] But I'll be honest — I don't remember recording it. [Laughs] I think they took my solo out to punish me for being late. It was a political move that Bob Ezrin made when he said, "Ace has got to be taught a lesson," and Gene and Paul followed him like puppets. They were always control freaks, and I was always the dude who drank too much and was late too many times. But even with all the nonsense, we were still friends and did get along to that point.

I wanted to touch on your late-Seventies live sound. I've read that while you had Marshall cabinets on stage,

you had Fender amps beneath the stage. Any truth to that?

That is true. [Laughs] I liked the hot sound of Fender amps, and I had an old Fender Champ that I had souped up with an even older Jensen C12 speaker. And I had a Linear Power Boost [LPB-1] by Electro-Harmonix that I loved. I used that, along with the Champ, because I liked the sustain I got. I'd have that mic'd up while I had these big Marshall cabinets behind me. If you listen to *Alive II*, you can hear the enormous sound I got from this little Fender amp running through the PA. Whatever works, right?

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention "Shock Me." Can you recall recording the solo?

Oh yeah, sure, I do. I played all the guitars and bass on "Shock Me." But as far as doing that song... it just happened. I'm the kind of guy who likes to fly by the seat of his pants, and I'd be lying if I said "Shock Me" wasn't like that. I don't like to think too hard or ponder about stuff. That's what

drove me crazy about *Destroyer*; we'd sometimes do 25 takes of a song, and they'd get worse and worse each time. I would tell the guys, "Look, let's call it a day because this song has lost all its spontaneity." And I was right because we'd come back the next day and nail it. So, when I was doing "Shock Me," I did that thing where I emptied my mind, and there it was.

Did you have any idea you'd recorded a solo that would be considered iconic?

No. [Laughs] I was just happy I got it done, and I moved on to the next song. Like I said, I don't like to overthink solos beforehand, and I don't look back on them when I finish. I get one done, and I'm on to the next song.

Do you have a favorite solo from Kiss's Seventies era?

One solo that always sticks out is "Strange Ways" from *Hotter Than Hell*. I had been recording all day and was frustrated. I remember saying, "I'm just gonna stand in front of the Marshall and let it fucking go." And this crazy solo with a massive dinosaur bend came out. But like I said before, there's "Deuce" because it was the first time I played with the guys, and then, there's "Shock Me." I consider those the bookends between the early and late-Seventies Kiss. As far as my playing goes, those are the definitive ones. 🎸